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The Disorientation of the "Establishment"

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THERE *IS* an American Establishment, but it is not those towers of Washington power which the critics of government and "the system" would like to topple.

The Establishment is outside this administration, distrusted by President Richard Nixon, largely opposed to the Indochina war and fearful of what the war is doing to American society. This American Establishment is itself demoralized and disoriented by the fact that the war and the American domestic crises are unintended outcomes of past Establishment policies.

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This Establishment is that group of men who—as Richard Rovere, a political analyst, half-mockingly put it at the beginning of the '60s—decide "what is and what is not respectable opinion in this country."

It is drawn chiefly from the great law firms and international banks of the East and from the universities and foundations. It largely shaped America's post-World War II foreign policy of containment and interventionism, but today it is appalled at how events have come out, on the defensive before the counterattack of Mr. Nixon's and Vice President Agnew's anti-establishment "Middle America."

YET WHEN today's critics and political controversialists—especially those on the left—talk about "the Establishment," do they really mean this internationalist and social-reformist coalition of foundation chiefs and famous professors and corporate lawyers?

Often enough they are talking about something quite different: they simply mean official "established" power in America. The word Establishment has come to serve as little more than a modish term to describe the powers-that-be in our society—with an implication that they are also the powers-that-won't-let-go.

The word is even used interchangeably with "the System"—which may mean only what we all once meant by "city hall" but more often describes the modern liberal political and social system: industrial-democratic society in Western Europe and the United States as it exists today.

For the radical wing of the New Left, it is no "establishment"—no oligarchy of powerful men—which they want to overturn but this modern Western political-economic system which, they say, indiscriminately produces warfare, welfare and the colossal trivialities of the consumer marketplace.

You can then, if you wish, think of the Establishment as what exists in our society, as against what you would like to bring into existence. But to do this takes away the special value of the term.

"The Establishment" has in the past meant that self-aware group of influential people who exercise special power not because they have been elected to office but because they possess wealth, social standing, special access to government or the communications media, or special knowledge and talent. The characteristic of Establishment power is that it is *PRIVILEDGE* power, and to an important extent it is UNACCOUNTED-FOR power. The public cannot easily vote this kind of power out of office.

THESE characteristics of Establishment power suggest why the word has slipped into wider use in today's debates. Unresponsiveness and inaccessibility have come to seem characteristics of political power itself.

The public complains that it is harder and harder to get the government to listen to its complaints—to make the government change its policies or pay attention to public opinion. To some extent it seems that government itself today displays the characteristics of Establishment power.

There is, then a certain inner logic to this popular redefinition of the word Establishment and it amounts to a commentary on the character of American government in recent years and on the political and social consequences of the Vietnam war.

The old Establishment was criticized in its day for indifference to the views of "Middle America," but in the period between the end of World War II and the mid-1960s public opinion generally supported internationalist policies which the Establishment helped to shape and for which it provided leadership. The first chiefs of our unified Department of Defense and of the postwar CIA were Establishment men (as the wartime OSS had been largely an Establishment operation). They manned important posts in the Marshall Plan and the Greek and Turkish aid programs. Dean Acheson was an Establishment man, and so were James Forrestal, Allen Dulles, Dean Rusk and Clark Clifford.

It was Establishment complacency which underwrote Mr. Johnson's willingness to enter into a war for which there was no clear mandate in American public opinion and when the public was expressing the most profound misgivings. There had come into existence an Establishment state of mind, deaf not only to criticism but to the common sense of the public.

POWER nearly always tends to create in men the idea that their power comes to them by right of their own wisdom or merit. Such men can have little patience with what they regard as untutored public opinion or irresponsible criticism.

They themselves—in a phrase often heard in Washington in the 1960s—are "tough-minded." If they are officials, they have "read the cables." Their critics by implication are timid or tender-minded; and the public simply doesn't know enough to have an opinion worth listening to. Out of this state of mind came Vietnam. Out of it, as an incidental result, was the Establishment cast down. An antiestablishment administration was elected to power, pledged to reverse the old policies, yet—as we see—entangled in the inheritance of those policies.

But as another result, this defiant and defensive Establishment state of mind has spread throughout the beleaguered military and foreign policy agencies of government. This is a consequence of power under challenge. National crisis and dissent, polarized national opinion, has tended to drive officials into insisting that only they understand the real needs of the nation. They bear responsibility; they live in the midst of the crisis; they know best.

These officials can find themselves powerfully motivated to try to dominate and manipulate opinion, to organize support from the "real" America as against the false. For elected leaders to do this is perfectly legitimate. For Mr. Nixon to call on the "forgotten Americans" to vote their support for his policies is clearly proper.

For important nonpolitical officials and agencies of government and military leaders to begin to think in these terms is a bad sign for a democracy. Its tendency is to turn the apparatus of government from the service of public opinion into an independent political force—a very powerful force and one significantly beyond public account.

This has been happening in American government in recent years, crucially so since the Vietnam interventions began. It is a process whose effect—and threat—is to turn "established" power, the legitimate authority of the state, into "Establishment" power which is privileged and irresponsible power. It is a process we need to halt because when the traditional distinctions which subordinate public service to public opinion begin to break down then the constitutional order has begun to break down.